A Rationale for the African American Man's Destruction in

Alice Walker's *Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple*

and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

by

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The African American man is destroyed physically or psychologically in many literary works because he is disliked and/or because of choices he makes. What is intriguing is that African American women writers Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, in particular, destroy African American men characters in selected works even though they experienced oppression similar to the African American man as a result of race and sex. In making decisions to destroy their African American men characters physically and psychologically, these writers did not discount the goodness that the African American man possessed. In directly and indirectly expressing their rational for destroying the African American man, Walker and Hurston both were socially and culturally aware that he must be restored.

Hurston and Walker are similar in technique, but they both bring their unique stance in their rationale for destroying their African American men characters. It is obvious that both have problems with the behaviors and/or attitudes of the African American man because of the oppression that each writer experienced with African American men personally. Hurston, through *Their Eyes*, seems to be more fixed in her perspective of the African American man than Walker. Although both writers see the antagonism in the African American man, Hurston seems

to believe that African American men are affected by the negative past so much so that it becomes a fixed part of them, so they will always possess negative tendencies. Hurston as a writer during the 1920s through the 1950s was more focused on declaring herself and women in general as the most powerful sex, but she was aware that we must build up the African American man, and she indicated this through *Their Eyes.* Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple* speak highly of Walker's character in reference to the African American man. Even though each text is written years apart, Walker did not shift in her perspective. Walker was consistent in her physical or psychological destruction and revival of the African American man. Walker had to ability as a writer to do what her forerunner Hurston could not do through her text *Their Eyes*. She did not reveal that she was permanently damaged as a woman/writer as a result of her negative personal situations with African American men. She revealed that there was a need for the African American man, and her role as a woman and writer was to assist him in his plights.

Hurston and Walker cannot be totally condemned as African American women writers for their rationale for destroying the African American man because I believe they were trying to alter others' perspective of the African American man. Their selected works bring awareness or remind the world that African American women today have to prune themselves against the negative and potential negative traits of their sons, brothers, husbands and/or fathers. The novels also have the ability to bring about conviction in some African American men as they recognize the negative attitudes and behaviors of the African American men characters in these texts, and perhaps force the African American man to circumcise his heart and mind so he can increase his love for himself and those around him.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my son Tyler for being a source of encouragement, for believing in me, and for praying for me throughout this process. I love you, and I am blessed beyond measure to have such a great hero in my life.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

In much of the literature by and about African Americans, it is evident that the African American man is viewed as negative and/or destroyed at some point as a result of his own actions or just simply because he is disliked. In this study, the negative image of the African American man is represented in *The Color Purple* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* by Alice Walker, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. In works by some African American writers, the African American man does not have much relief when it comes to how he is represented or treated. Writers such as Richard Wright in *Native Son* puts his African American man character Bigger Thomas in a position in which he is destroyed, and Harper Lee in her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* depicts the destruction of Tom Robinson in order to bring an awareness of the racial injustices during the 1930s. What was intriguing to me was why African American women writers Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, in particular, depict the destruction of African American men in their novels. I found it to be ironic that African American women writers would destroy African American men through their writings, since both experienced a degree of oppression as a result of race and sex.

A recent movie *For Colored Girls* produced by Tyler Perry in 2010 reminded the world of the plight of the African American woman and, whether intended to be subtle or not, revealed the plight of the African American man. Through this contemporary movie, the African American women's resilience is seen, but the portrayal of the physical and mental destruction of the African American man is also evident. In selected writings by Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker the same concept is seen. It is evident the reader is dealing with two oppressed groups when reading Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Walker's *Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple*: The woman writer and The African American men characters.

There are three theories considered in this thesis: feminist such as it is practiced by bell hooks, Alice Walker's womanism, and psychoanalytical. Feminism helps to explain why the African American female writer reacted to the negative African American men by destroying him. The oppression of women, particularly African American women, is something that extends far back in history. bell hooks notes in her book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* that

> [m]ore than a hundred years have passed since the day Sojourner Truth stood before an assembled body of white women at an anti-slavery rally in Indiana and bared her breasts to prove that she was indeed a woman. To Sojourner … baring her breasts was a small matter. She faced her audience without fear without shame, proud of having been born black and female. Yet the white man who yelled at Sojourner, 'I don't believe you really are a woman,' unwittingly voiced America's contempt and disrespect for black womanhood. In the eyes of the 19th century white public, the black female was a creature unworthy of the title woman; she was mere chattel, a thing, an animal. (159)

The latter set the stage for the African American woman to struggle to earn her rightful place in the world, and her struggle with oppression is evident through the women suffrage movement of the 19th century. However, even as the woman suffrage amendment was passed, "[it] failed to alter in any way the social status of [African American] women[, and] … [African American women] found that obtaining rights for women would have little impact on their social status as long as white racial imperialism automatically denied them full citizenship" (hooks 172). hooks also adds that the African American woman's emphasis on woman's rights had to shift because Jim Crow laws came into play, and "Jim Crow apartheid threatened to strip black people of the

rights and achievement that they had acquired … [and African American women] concentrated their energies on resisting racism" (173).

Feminism brought about a rise in and an awareness of African American women writers, and "the negative tensions that exist between African American women and men [may be seen] as being solely motivated by 'American racism and oppression'" (hooks 115). As a result of the African American man's dominating nature, "women of color had no alternative but to discover and define themselves through their writings in order to liberate themselves from oppression and to enlighten the world about their condition" (Deena 19).

Feminism becomes important to my research because Hurston, as a writer and as an African American woman, produced a work that, "[a]s feminist and African American critical strategies became available[,] … enabled scholars to "read" *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as the story of Janie's search for self-identity, for autonomy in the face of controlling others, for the right to define her own life rather than having it defined by others" (Corse and Griffin 187). Hurston empowered a female protagonist to narrate her own story. Hurston could have easily omitted Janie Crawford's role of telling her story to her best friend, but Hurston, at best, gives the bold hint that the woman's voice is powerful, and Alice Walker used a similar technique in *The Color Purple*. Deborah L. Madsen in *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice* emphasized that through *The Color Purple,* Walker formulates letters that are a reflection of the African American woman's experience. Through the letters the African American woman becomes the authority (223). Madsen also emphasized that "[b]eing a Black revolutionary artist means [the woman] must be 'the voice of the people, but she is also the People' … Through literature, the writer engages with, and continues into the future, the tradition of African-American struggle" (222-23).

Even though Hurston and Walker can be considered feminist writers, feminism was more for white women than for African American women, and "[p]rejudices white women activists felt toward [African American] women were far more intense than their prejudices toward [African American] men … Many white women felt their status as ladies would be undermined were they to associate with black women" (hooks 130). As a response to African American women's limited inclusion in feminism, Alice Walker gave a four part definition of her term "Womanist" in her volume of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens.* Womanist is defined as follows:

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

   2. *Also:* A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?"

Ans. “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.*

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (Walker, *In Search* xi-xii)

As writers, Hurston and Walker were acting as “responsible” and “in charge” women because they saw it as their call to save not only the African American woman but the African American man as well. Walker included in her definition of womanism that it is a woman who “sometimes loves individual men sexually and nonsexually [and is] [c]ommitted to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker, *In Search* xi). Walker’s womanism reveals that the African American woman should advocate to preserve the African American man. Her concept is critical to my investigation because Walker and Hurston highlight the goodness in African American men in the works represented, and each writer, through characterization, did not neglect the importance of the African American woman’s self-love and willingness to elevate herself and the African American man. *Their Eyes, Third Life* and *The Color Purple*, even though each depicted the destruction of the African American man, did leave the reader with positive aspects of the African American man to build upon, generation after generation.

Psychoanalytical theory, particularly black psychology, is relevant to my work because it adds to the reasoning of why African American men in Hurston’s and Walker’s personal and/or professional lives and their African American men characters behave and/or are characterized

negatively. Joseph L. White and Thomas A. Parham assert in *The Psychology of Blacks: An African American Perspective* (1990) that "Black psychology is as old as African heritage and the cultural complexion Blacks have sustained within American society" (22), and "Black psychology and the psychology of Blackness reflect an attempt to build a conceptual model that organizes, explains, and leads to understanding the psychosocial behavior of African-Americans based on the primary dimensions of an African-American world view" (23). In discussing Walker's and Hurston's perception of the African American man through their characterization of them, one can see the writers' views and the African American men characters' behavior and/or attitudes as a result of past experiences. Adelebert L. Jenkins explains in *Psychology and African Americans: A Humanistic Approach* (1995) that

> [b]lacks are commonly described as 'reactors' rather than 'pro-actors' to the circumstances they face. They are often said to respond either as victims who accommodate passively to discrimination and economic marginality or as aggressors who deal with their individual and group subordination by striking back violently. The options that Blacks choose are described as submissive or defensive … Such a picture is one of human beings who only react to their environments rather than take charge of their destinies. (1)

Perhaps Hurston and Walker recognized that the African American man was not going to take responsibility for his negative actions depicted in their works, and he needed some assistance in doing so; therefore, these writers made the decision to depict the destruction of the African American man in order to reveal to the African American man that there is a need for him to change. Hurston and Walker represent African American women who are disheartened by the negative African American man. Through the fictional works represented, Hurston and Walker

give themselves the power to eliminate the negative within African American men even though they destroy them through physical and psychological deaths. Their destruction of the African American man is something that these women could not do in reality.

My focus is Zora Neale Hurston's and Alice Walker's rationale for creating some African American men characters that are destroyed in selected works. The works that express the destruction of the African American man are Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Walker's *Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple*. Despite being black themselves, Hurston and Walker eradicated, through physical and psychological deaths, selected African American men characters in their texts. The works discussed in this thesis are texts that bring about the question: "Why did these writers destroy some of their African American men characters?" Hurston's rationale for the destruction of the African American men characters is seen through my exploration of her personal trouble with men, the unfavorable African American men she depicted in *Their Eyes*, and the destruction of the African American man as a necessary element to save herself as an African American woman. Walker's rationale for the destruction of her African American men characters is also seen through my analysis of her personal difficulties with men and the impact slavery and sharecropping had on the African American man, the negative African American man depicted in *The Third Life* and *The Color Purple*, and her destruction of him as an act of restoration.

Chapter One: Zora Neale Hurston's Love-Hate Relationship

> "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men" (Hurston 1).

Through Zora Neale Hurston's opening line of her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, it can be argued that she is referencing the African American man because the African American man during the 1920s and 1930s, the setting of the novel, was trying to escape the segregation and discrimination he experienced among whites. During Hurston's lifetime and career, she was surrounded by African American men that may have been frustrated by the struggles they experienced because of their race, and they seemed to have relinquished their responsibility to persevere in spite of struggles. Hurston recognize that African American men faced a lot of hardships that damaged them psychologically, but Hurston saw goodness at his core, and as a result, it will be argued that she had a love-hate relationship with the African American man. In this chapter, there will be an analysis of how negative experiences with African American men, such as her father and literary critics impacted her novel *Their Eyes*.

When a child loses his/her mother before reaching adulthood, one would think that the father would become more of a protector, especially for his daughter, but this was not the case for Hurston. Prior to Ann Hurston 's death, John Hurston portrayed a disdain for Zora as his second daughter. After having two male children, John longed for one daughter and one daughter only, and in 1889, he received his desire, Sarah Emmeline (Plant 10). Two years later, Zora was born, but she did not receive a welcoming attitude from her father. John wanted "'plenty more sons, but no more girl babies'" (Plant 11). His desire for more male children revealed he may have favored male children and desired to have many males that would become leaders like him. Children are aware of, very early on, those individuals that genuinely value

them and those that do not, and Zora had to have noticed this about her father. Zora's real bond rested with her mother, and Deborah Plant emphasized the bond that Zora and Anne shared:

> When her mother exhorted her to 'jump at de sun,' she, in essence, was advising Zora Neale to immerse in Self – not the lowercase self of human identity and personality, but the capitalized Self of spirit and consciousness … If Hurston's mother did not articulate this cosmological philosophy in words, she certainly demonstrated it in her actions and her adamant determination to protect Zora Neale from those who would 'squinch her spirit'. (14)

Like most parents, Anne felt that Zora was destined for greatness in some way. She may not have been able to predict what Zora would accomplish in life, but she recognized that her role was to shelter Zora as much as possible from those things in life that could destroy a young girl's self-image. One would think that John would also have this same passion for Zora, but he did not.

John Hurston was a family man indeed, but he was self-centered to an extent. His "work as a carpenter took him far and wide and away for long periods of time" (Plant 11), and it was through one of his long trips "south into Florida … [where he] discovered Eatonville. A new town. A self-governed, all-Negro town … A place where [he] could realize his ambitions as an individual … (Plant 11). It was in Eatonville that John became a preacher, and he "was one of the strongest men in the village … known for his bravery, leadership, and powerful poetical preaching" (Hemenway 14). Being a part of Eatonville, Florida may have only highlighted the negative aspects of John Hurston. To him, "Eatonville was the promise of a new beginning" [because] "[t]he hand-to-mouth existence of the plantation life had begun to 'irk and bind' [him]" (Plant 11). Eatonville became a place that made John feel *manly*, a place where he felt

secure and felt there was stability for his family. As a preacher and as one who was a part of a successful all black town, one would expect John Hurston to do some self-assessment as a father and recognize that his treatment of his daughter was not at all manly, was wrong, and was definitely not beneficial to Zora as a young woman. Zora had a

> … belligerence … [that] kept her constantly at odds with her father. While her mother was telling her to 'jump at de sun'[,] … her father was counseling more realistic goals: 'It did not due for Negros to have too much spirit, or 'The white folks won't stand for it.' He frequently complained to her mother that Zora was going to be hanged before she got grown, that her mother 'was going to suck sorrow for not beating my temper out of me before it was too late.' … [H]e was only attempting to inoculate the sensibilities of southern survival."(Hemenway 14)

As a result of her father's rejection of her spirit, Hurston realized "what poverty could be like, how people could be 'slave ships in shoes' (Hemenway 17). Her poverty was not necessarily a financial poverty, but a poverty that consisted of a lack of love from her father that she needed inwardly – a poverty that intensified after her mother's death.

Robert Hemenway noted in *Zora Neale Hurston A Literary Biography* that "[t]he year following her mother's death were extremely hard. Her father quickly remarried, and she [Zora] was sent to school in Jacksonville. Eventually, her opposition to her stepmother caused her relations with her father to deteriorate, and he even proposed that the Jacksonville school adopt her" (17). John Hurston appeared to be more focused on himself and his new wife than on Zora's well-being. One would expect in Hurston's situation that she and her father would

develop an intense bond because he was aware of how Anne Hurston nurtured and paid special attention to their daughter.

A daughter learns a lot about herself from a father sometimes. Although John was not physically absent from Hurston's life during her childhood, his presence was not critical to her because it was missing an emotional link between the two of them. Laura B. Randolph stated in "The Crucial Relationship Like Father, Like Daughter" which appeared in Ebony magazine in 1980 that the father/daughter relationship is "[o]ne of the most intricate of all human bonds … [It] is a complex web of emotional ties that affect a woman's life forever[;] … it will shape the value by which she will live" (152). In a perfect world, a daughter learns that she is beautiful, intelligent and can do the impossible from her father. He dictates how she will perceive herself at an early age; therefore, his words and actions, directly and indirectly, are critical. It is important to note that in Hurston's life after her father, John, remarried, her life became imbalanced, and "[s]he grew self-conscious about her looks, feeling that no man could really care for her" (Hemenway 17). Through the latter, it is evident how Hurston viewed herself and gained a false perception of men. Due to the importance of the father's role, Hurston may have developed a mindset that would cause her to battle men directly and indirectly for the rest of her life. Her father "[was] the man against whom [she would] judge all other men – boyfriends, colleagues, husbands, friends" (Randolph 152). Hurston was on guard against African American men and, her wall of defense was apparent in marriages and in relationships with literary figures such as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright.

Hurston had what one could view as a controlling nature from the start; it was one that her mother encouraged and one that her father loathed because he noticed a nature in her that was like his – a nature that he perhaps felt belonged to men. Hurston was far from being like her

sister Sarah who was quiet in spirit and passive. It can be argued that Hurston's spirit of being in control and her lack of submissiveness intensified as a result of the way her father treated her. Hurston knew that men were important to the world, and offered things that a woman could not, but it appeared that she longed to be equal to men, particularly African American men. Peter Kerry Power pointed out in "Gods of Physical Violence, Stopping at Nothing: Masculinity, Religion and Art in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston" that "… men possess and display power – whether sexual, geographic, literary, or religious power – that Hurston desires for herself. Males … are regularly oppressive, but there is, nevertheless, something about their 'masculinity' that is also often desirable" (231). There is no evidence that Hurston longed to be a mother or a submissive wife that would stay at home and take care of home affairs like her mother did; it seemed that she ran away from these aspects of womanhood by wrapping herself in her career and literary ambitions. Hurston may have had a hard time understanding herself and her mental makeup. Her nature may have caused her to indirectly emasculate African American men because she wanted to be in charge, to lead, and to prove to them that she was their equal. Hurston was ahead her of time in this respect – more like women today who think about family last and personal ambitions first. Anne Hurston once told Zora: "'Don't you love nobody better'n you do yo'self. Do, you'll by dying befo' yo' time is out'" (Boyd 69). The latter can be attested to why Hurston experienced trouble in her three marriages.

Hurston's three marriages were short lived. Her first marriage to Herbert Sheen lasted for four months (Hemenway 93). She mentioned that "'For the first time since my mother's death, there was someone who felt really close and warm to me'" (Hemenway 93), but

> [b]y January 1928, her relations with Sheen had been broken off, and there was only intermittent, perfunctory communication before divorce … the marriage was

> inhibiting her work. As she remarked to Langston Hughes at the time, 'Herbert holds me back.' … Hurston wrote to a friend, 'I hear that my husband has divorced me, so that's that. Don't think I am upset, for your lil Zora is playing her harp like David.' (Hemenway 94)

Hurston's reference to David in the above quotation emphasized her admiration for the Biblical male character. Hurston loved the character David because "'[a]ll David wanted to know from God was whom to kill and when. He took care of details himself. Never a quiet moment' … She plainly admir[ed] the main strength of David and David's God, men who set their face toward the world and act, men who make a difference here and now, which may mean, indeed, making a difference in blood" (Powers 234). Hurston possessed the power to make adjustments in her life, and had the strength to eradicate situations and/or people that tried to hinder her accomplishments.

Hurston's next marriage to Albert Price III in 1939, a younger man, lasted less than a year (Hemenway 273). Her divorce was marked by what Hurston claimed as abuse from Price, and he claimed that Hurston promised him financial support in continuing his education (Hemenway 274). Hurston and Albert tried to reconcile their marriage, but the reconciliation did not last for long; they parted in 1940 (Hemenway 274). Her final marriage to James Howell Pitts, who was eight years her junior, only lasted eight months (Boyd 373). Valerie Boyd noted that "[t]heir breakup … was helped along by Hurston's continued ambivalence about marriage and her unflagging commitment to her work" (373). Arguably, Hurston's troubled marriages were not made to last. She may have longed to fill a void that her father did not, but "… she was unwilling to … assume a subordinate role … Hurston's independence had led her to rail in public life against 'the natural apathy of women … who voted as their husbands do,' and in private life

at self-inspired Casanovas … " (Hemenway 308). Hurston sought and gave into the temporary marriages because she thought she could handle being a submissive woman, but she was clearly not built for a life defined by marriage or men. Hurston saw men as creatures who could not handle her level of independence as a woman. She recognized that her self-reliance brought about an "inadequacy in men in her own life" (Hemenway 312). Hurston noted this inadequacy in her comments on men and their feeling of inferiority;

> Have you ever been tied in close contact with a person who had a strong sense of inferiority? I have, and it is hell. They carry it like a raw sore on the end of the index finger. You go along thinking well of them and doing what you can to make them happy and suddenly you are brought up short with accusation of looking down on them …, It colors *everything* … He had a good mind, many excellent qualities, and I am certain that he loved me. But his feeling of inferiority would crop up and hurt me at the most unexpected moments. (qtd. in Hemenway 312)

Hurston had to remain on guard against men and protecting her heart and career at all costs. She gave marriage three tries, but, inwardly, she did not long for them to be successful. Hurston's troubles with men would extend beyond her three marriages.

Hurston was a writer that "refused to create representations of essentialized blackness struggling against forces of white oppression" (Miles 85), and as a result, she was looked upon negatively by her literary counterparts, particularly Richard Wright. Wright asserted in reference to *Their Eyes* that

> Miss Hurston can write; but her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley. Her dialogue

> manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far as it goes. Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the "white folks" laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in the safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears. (qtd. in Lester 3)

Hurston does reveal the simple side of the African American in *Their Eyes*, but it can be viewed as a safe stance because she is embracing what she loved about her culture, and she is revealing that she is still in touch with the essence of her culture. She depicts what is a common theme in many literally works, whether expressed explicitly or not, that life has hardship built in it, and it is up to the individual how they handle it.

Hurston was aware that "racial discrimination was just as debilitating in the North as in the South" (Patterson 35), but she chose to elude the themes of racism and violence and to point out that "[t]here were no discreet nuances of life [in the Southern black community]. There was an open kindness, anger, hate, love, envy and its kinfolks, but all emotions were naked, and nakedly arrived at. You got what your strengths would bring you … This was the spirit of the whole new part of the state at the time …" (Patterson 33). Hurston's literary approach disgusted Wright; he felt that "neither North nor South offered many alternatives to African Americans. They were so hemmed in by repression and violence that human development was permanently arrested" (Patterson 43). Perhaps, Hurston enjoyed Wright's challenges because she was up against a man, and because of her dominant personality, she knew she had the ability to withstand his attacks. Wright recognized that "the South was far more complicated than his

portrait suggested, but it was Hurston who was willing to peel away the layers and expose the core of Southern life … [that] most black people managed to retain their humanity even in the face of unrelenting hardship" (Patterson 45). It was with comfort and ease that Hurston structured *Their Eyes* to lack the white oppression, violence, etc. that many people were accustomed to reading. Hurston "utilize[ed] [*Their Eyes*] itself to map out her legitimacy, as an individual and for Black women in society" (Rockquemore 8). Taking charge and taking a stance was her drive, because after all, she was a man in thought and a woman in body. Not only did Hurston experience issues with Richard Wright, but also other men such as Langston Hughes and James Shepherd, president of North Carolina College for Negroes in Durham, NC.

Robert Hemenway pointed out that *Mule Bone*, a play on which Hughes and Hurston collaborated, "[was] the reason Langston Hughes … never forgave Hurston for what he considered theft and dishonesty [,and] it illuminate[d] complex tensions in Hurston's life that arose from patronage and personality" (136). The details of the *Mule Bone* situation are not critical to the argument here, but the fact that Hurston would not try to reconcile her friendship with Hughes is important. Maybe Hurston always saw Hughes as a threat because he was a man. She loved working with him, and she confirmed it through two lines of a letter written to him: "'In the beginning, Langston, I was very eager to do the play with you. ANYthing you said would go over big with me'" (Hemenway 14). Within the same letter, Hurston outlined three things that Hughes had done to trouble her, and they led her to go "'off to [herself] and [try] to resolve to have no more friendships …'" (Hemenway 14). Once again Hurston felt let down by another man. She had grown very close to Hughes as a friend, and she recognized, for whatever reason, that their friendship and working relationship lacked the same intensity as before. Hurston can be seen as a flight risk when it comes to dealing with men, and this could be

attributed to her unstable relationship with her father. Hurston's pattern of fleeing relationships with men was also evident in her working relationship with James Shepherd.

According to Hemenway's biography of Hurston, Shepherd was a man who "set the rules for his institution and did not always welcome differing views. A man of great energy and skill, he was one of the best-known black educators in the South. Shepherd and Hurston began their associations amiably enough, but they very soon crossed swords" (254). Alice Walker spoke of Hurston's personality stating that she was "a woman who … spoke her mind … practically always" (Walker, *In Search* 87). Hurston did not seem to know how to handle her own forwardness. Her boldness may have led to the chaotic relationship with Shepherd, and Hemenway elaborated on it:

> She ignored campus housing …[S]he complained about the hour her classes were scheduled … [She was] [f]itful in her teaching – one day brilliant, the next preoccupied … Frustrated by what she perceived as lack of support from the college administration, she urged Shepherd to provide a 'proper frame for me to work' … The upshot was that during the 1939-40 school year at North Carolina College for Negroes the director of dramatic productions never staged a single play. She and Shepherd were mutually glad to part company … [Hurston] "took her revenge … [and] referred to North Carolina College as 'a one horse religious school' that became the state college for blacks because of Shepherd's political influences. (254)

Hurston's actions towards men and her problems with them revealed that she may have felt inferior towards them, and one way of dealing with this issue was to try to destroy them. Maybe she wanted to prove to the world that "the job of educated women … [was] to change the

world[,] [and that] … [w]omen must be prepared to think for themselves, which means, undoubtedly, trouble with [men], which means all kinds of heartache, … and times when [they] will wonder if independence … is worth it all … [I]t is. For the world is not good enough; [women] must make it better (Walker, *In Search* 37).

One of Hurston's final public battles involved a young boy, and this battle set the stage for her downfall. In September1948, Hurston was charged with molesting a ten- year- old boy (Hemenway 319). Although these allegations were later proven false, Hurston's " … life unraveled in erratic acts, irrational wanderings, and personal incompetence …" (Hemenway 322). Although Hurston's accuser was a young boy, he eventually admitted he participated in oral and anal sex with his friends, and he was not forced into it by anyone (Boyd 390). Hurston was witnessing through this situation how males can be destructive at an early age. Yes, the accusations against Hurston were serious, and the lies of the young boy destroyed Hurston's world, but not her spirit. Hurston, "[a]s much as she may have wanted to … knew she could not just lie down and die. Through all the hardships of her life, she had never allowed anything – not her mother's death, not her father's neglect, not her years of poverty – to break her spirit" (Boyd 398). It is evident that Hurston as a woman and as a writer struggled with African American men directly and indirectly. As a writer, she felt the need to paint a portrait of the African American man's nature, and she used her novel *Their Eyes* to reveal the proclivities in men that needed to be destroye

Chapter Two: The *Ms.* and the Pruning Process

It is important to analyze the protagonist Janie Crawford in this argument because of her role in Hurston's destruction of the African American man. Based on information presented in the previous chapter about the men in Hurston's personal and professional life, Janie can be seen as a representation of Hurston. Hurston placed Janie as a woman who developed the power to destroy the African American man physically and psychologically. Hurston fashioned Janie to reveal that women are powerful like men, and her characterization of Janie perhaps proved what Hurston tried to achieve in her life. Like Hurston, Janie did not have a male role model, and the men that she chose for marriage reflected an instability that arose due to her lack of a favorable father-figure. Janie went through three marriages searching for a man to fill a void that should have been filled by her father. Hurston, in constructing Janie, created a female protagonist that represented what will be referred to as the *Ms.*

The *Ms.* is a woman who, due to the absence of her father's influence, becomes the controller of or longs to control the African American man directly and indirectly. The concept of *Ms*. "gives [Janie] an identifiable status, yet it does not limit [her] to one role or life experience" (King 686). Hurston's Janie evolved into a *Ms.* because of her frustration with the African American man's treatment of her. She was characterized as a victim, but she became the victimizer by the conclusion of *Their Eyes*.

When the reader first meets Janie Crawford, she is returning home, and, as she walks past onlookers, one of them takes note of her attire: "'What she doin coming back here in dem overalls? Can't she find no dress to put on? – Where's that blue satin dress she left her in?'" (Hurston 2). Janie had to endure the oppressive symbols of the apron with her first husband Logan and the headrag with her second husband, Joe Starks. She then went from these items to

wearing overalls which represented freedom with Tea Cake. Based on the observers' reaction, apparently, overalls were not the typical attire for women during that time, and the reference to a specific dress of Janie's confirms that most women usually did not wear pants. The fact that Janie had chosen to return to her home town in clothing that was common for a man revealed that she had taken on the role of man to some extent. Gordon E. Thompson points out that

> Janie is merely adopting privileges that Hurston regards, finally, as gender neutral. As Fox-Genovese noticed 'once the gaps between sexuality and gender begin to appear, men and women can begin to question whether gender flows naturally from sexuality, whether social demands on the individual are biologically determined … Neither masculinity nor femininity exists as an absolute' … And this is a conclusion at which Hurston also appears to have arrived. (755)

When the novel begins, Janie has already experienced three marriages, and her final husband, Tea Cake, had recently died. At this point of return, the reader recognizes how Janie's life experiences had changed her. Her friend Pheoby noted that "'[e]ven wid dem overhalls on, you shows yo' womanhood'" (Hurston 4). Janie had maintained her womanhood physically, but the overalls represented an internal transition in Janie. She had taken complete authority of her life after the destruction and/or death of all her husbands. Janie "[was] not looking backward, but forward. Her homecoming [was] not reluctant or shameful but triumphant. She return[ed] of her own accord, master of herself and her future … [Janie's character revealed] … the personal development that can be experienced through traumas" (Mcknight 89).

During Janie's early life, it is important to note that Janie often communicated with nature. She had developed a keen passion for the pear tree:

> Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the backyard. She had been spending every minute that she could steal … under that tree … It called her to come and gaze on a mystery … She was stretched on her back … She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; … So this was marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. (Hurston 10-11)

The pear tree ignited Janie's desire for marriage, and she desired to be "any pear tree in bloom[,]" and she wondered "[w]here were the singing bees for her" (Hurston 11). The pear tree caused Janie to think about what she desired for herself. She was captivated by the pear tree and how other aspects of nature interacted with it. She longed for a man to behold her beauty in the same manner in which she was intrigued by the pear tree. Janie's "identification of marriage with total fulfillment reflect[ed] Janie's immature consciousness …" (King 687). Without a male foundation, she unconsciously placed herself into situations in which she was forced to develop into *Ms.*

Janie experienced hardships in each of her marriage, but, through each marriage, she became a stronger woman. Janie's role as a destroyer began in her first marriage to Logan Killicks. Going into this marriage, she did not have her heart guarded. She merely existed in this relationship because of her grandmother's, Nanny, desires for her. Janie's marriage to Killicks was forced upon her by Nanny. Nanny stated, "'Ah wanted yuh to school out and pick from a higher bush and a sweeter berry. But dat ain't yo' idea Ah see'… 'Brother Logan Killicks. He's a good man …'" (Hurston 13). After her grandmother's death, Janie realized "that marriage did not make love. [Her] first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (Hurston 25). Janie began to see that she was valuable as an individual, and she reached a point in which she longed to escape what was entrapping her, Logan Killicks. Janie attempted to be happy with

Killicks for her grandmother's sake, but he "killed" any warmth or love she was trying to feel in the marriage. Janie expressed that "'[s]ome folks never was meant to be loved and he's one of 'em … Ah hates de way his head is so long one way and so flat on de sides … His belly is too big … He don't even never mention nothin' pretty … Ah wants things sweet wid my marriage …'" (Hurston 24). Janie was not experiencing the joy that she thought she would experience with marriage. The marriage to Logan was agitating her. Janie was showing a "determination to defend herself against the assaults on her giving and loving nature" (Ferguson 187). Her way of defending herself was by asserting herself and leaving Logan without any notice. Janie's leaving destroyed Killicks emotionally because "[t]he last sentence [he spoke] was half a sob and half a cry" (Hurston 32). Due to the fact that Logan recognized that Janie was not interested in him any longer, he made comments about himself to try to boost his own ego. He highlighted that he was a great man and worked hard and those were the reasons that Janie did not value him (Hurston 32). His praising of himself can be seen as an indication that he was hoping that those qualities would be enough for Janie to stay, but they were not.

In Janie's final two marriages, her role as a destroyer became more evident. Although Janie experienced oppression in these relationships, Hurston emphasized a young girl that developed into a woman with a new sense of self. Barbara Berg's definition of feminism defines the type of Janie that Hurston develops: "'It is the freedom to decide her own destiny; … freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely to actions … It postulates that woman's essential worth stems from her common humanity and does not depend on the other relationships of her life'" (qtd in hooks 194). Janie's journey through the marriages taught her how to guard herself against the negative tendencies that were apparent in each relationship.

Their Eyes revealed African American men that displayed or concealed, to some extent, their enmity towards the African American woman. Hurston painted portraits of the African American man that suppressed the spirit of the African American woman. Through her character Joe Starks, Hurston revealed an African American man that enjoyed control, a man that was conscious to the fact that his controlling nature weakened others. He was one that can be referred to as a "bold beast." When Joe Starks was first introduced, it was apparent that he loved himself more than anyone or anything else. He had the mindset that was focused on making things fit into his perfect world. He was goal driven, but there was not any balance to this drive. After marrying Janie, Joe began to assert himself as the "I god …" (Hurston 40) and the "big voice" (Hurston 46). Starks drew people to him because of the "bow-down command in his face, and every step he took [towards something] made the thing more tangible" (Hurston 47). Apparently, Joe knew how to carry himself in a manner that caused him to get what he needed to fit into his plan for his perfect world – a subservient community and wife. His actions such as "bitting down on cigars[,] … saving his breath on talk and swinging round in [his] chair … weakened people" (Hurston 47), and this ability to weaken people did not exclude his wife. Joe is the epitome of the colonizer during slavery, and as a colonizer Joe played on Janie's psyche.

Before Janie and Joe were married, Joe was a man that studied Janie's nature, and recognized that she was easy to manipulate and control – one that had not reached mental maturity. Joe used his voice to cause Janie to look at her current marriage to Logan Killicks as more of a burden than she already perceived. Joe stated, "'You behind a plow! You ain't got no … business wid uh plow … A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self … They sat under the tree and talked … Every day after that they managed to meet …" (Hurston 29). He had the ability to seize Janie's attention because he possessed the

boldness to test Janie's loyalty to her present state, and he knew how to "[speak] for change and chance" (Hurston 29) to win Janie over. Joe's control over Janie intensified during their marriage. It was apparent that he married Janie because she was a perfect piece to the puzzle of the life he was trying to portray. McGowan noted that "Joe … does not dominate her by forcing her into hard labor … but by turning her into a thing, transforming her into his commodity" (113). The latter reveals that Hurston, as a writer, is making it even more imperative that Joe is "destroyed." As an "object" of Joe's, Janie does not have a voice, and is not expected, by her colonizer, to act outside of her nature.

Hurston further highlighted the negative male that was apparent in Joe by likening him to a hog before his death. Hurston stated, "He gave a deep-growling sound like a hog dying down in the swamp and trying to drive off disturbance" (85). Although Hurston referenced Joe as a dying hog in the previous quotation, it is likely that she indirectly characterized Joe as a hog before he started to die. Alive and functioning, hogs are useful to humanity because they are a source of food and nourishment. The physical make-up of the hog creates mental images of strength, prestige and power. Hurston, as a writer, emphasized through Joe that good qualities such as strength and prestige can be misused. Joe's weaknesses as a hog were made apparent when Hurston incorporated the folkloric mule story. The mule story, particularly the mule's funeral, was Hurston's tactic to show how negative the African American man was toward the African American woman. Hurston wrote,

> [T]he mule was left to the already impatient buzzards … A circle, a swoop and a hop with spread-out wings. Close in, close in till some of the more hungry or daring perched on the carcass … The flock had to wait for the white-headed

> leader … He finally lit on the ground … and leaped upon it [, the mule,] … and asked: 'What killed this man?'/ The chorus answered, 'Bare, bare fat.' (62)

Earlier in the novel, through the character of Nanny, Hurston illustrated that "de nigger woman [was] the mule uh the de world" (14), and in doing so, she made it apparent that the dead mule in the mule story was symbolic of the African American woman. As a hog, Joe was being nourished by making himself "fat" through the destruction of the African American woman/mule with his voice and his actions. The mule's dying, as a result of a lack of fat, revealed that the man/hog was causing the African American woman to deteriorate -- he took away her nourishment. Like Hurston's father, who could be described as one that allowed his prominence as a man and a leader to overshadow his good judgment and the unconditional love and support he should have given to his family, Joe was characterized as an African American man who displayed manliness outwardly, but inwardly, he was warped. Similar to a hog, which is "fattened … primarily [by feeding] on food scraps" (Hog 3), basically garbage from the house, Joe fed on the negative or the garbage, so to speak, that his positive traits produced. He allowed his strength, power and prestige to cause him to overlook Janie's strengths, and mistreated her as his wife.

In order to thwart Joe's destruction of Janie, Hurston juxtaposed Janie and Joe -- he is no longer the hog and she is no longer the mule. Janie became a hog and began to nourish herself by taking control of her relationship with Joe Starks by using her voice to destroy him. For most of her marriage to Starks, he was her voice, and Janie allowed him to define her. Shawn E. Miller felt that "Joe's motive in silencing Janie seem[ed] to be … jealousy, and the pattern continue[d] through his making Janie wear the head-rag, his refusing her the right to join in the mule-talk and checker playing of the store porch, and his insisting that Janie was 'getting' too

moufy' whenever she challenge[d] him" (78). The true question here is why did Janie allow Joe to rob her of her voice for so long before she reacted? Perhaps Janie was clinging to the hope of achieving the sweet things in her marriage that gave her the same feeling of sitting under the pear tree and thinking (Hurston 24). She desired real communication between her and Joe – a communication that involved a pure concern for each other. Maybe Janie believed that if she kept quiet and did what she was told to do, her life would eventually be what she desired. Sally L. Kitch believed that Janie was using silence as a method of survival (72). Her method of survival could indicate that she was thinking about the state of her marriage, and how the control of her voice by her husband did not reflect what she desired in a marriage. In her continual search for self, Janie reached a point of boldness and began to use her "voice" to destroy Joe.

After many insults on Janie, Joe finally had the opportunity to see the power he perhaps knew Janie had all along. Joe became synonymous to the mule during his physical decline and/or loss of fat. Janie was able to stand portly as a hog and successfully challenge Joe for the first time. Hurston indicated how Janie observed that "Joe wasn't so young as he used to be. There was already something dead about him. He didn't rear back in his knees any longer" (77). For the first time, Janie observed weakness in Joe, and she realized it was time for her strength to be revealed. She ultimately crushed the authority in Joe by stating, "Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches you look lak de change uh life" (Hurston 79). Janie had achieved something that is referred to as playing the dozens, which is commonly practiced among African American men (Adams 209). By attacking Joe's manhood, Janie was revealing that Joe was useless as a man. Rodger D. Abrahams indicated that

> The process of "playing the dozens" is illustrative of these psychosocial remarks. It is an early example of the infantile fixation illustrated by the use of agonistic

> rhymed verbal forms, a neurotic symptom which is observable in many Negro males through much of their lives …[T]he dozens stands as a mechanism which helps the Negro youth adapt to his changing world and trains him for similar and more complex verbal endeavors in the years of his manhood. The dozens are commonly called "playing" or "sounding," and the nature of the terms indicates the kind of procedure involved; "playing" illustrates that a game or contest is being waged, and "sounding" shows that the game is vocal. It is, in fact, a verbal contest which is an important part of the linguistic and psychosocial development of the Negroes who indulge in the verbal strategy. (209)

Janie had mastered the ability to engage in a battle with her colonizer, and she recognized the best way to irritate and mentally destroy her victimizer was to mimic him verbally. Janie had clearly achieved something that was uncommon for black women based on the other men's reaction when she attacked Joe: "'Great God from Zion!' Sam Watson gasped. 'Y'all really playin' de dozens tunight.' 'Wha – whut's dat you said?' Joe challenged, hoping his ears had fooled him. 'You heard her you ain't blind,' … 'Ah ruther be shot with tacks than tuh hear dat 'bout mahself …'" (Hurston 79). Hurston emphasized that

> [t]hen Joe Starks realized all the meaning and his vanity bled like a flood. Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible. The thing that Saul's daughter had done to David. But Janie had done worse, she had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing … For what can excuse a man in the eyes of other men for lack of strength? … There was nothing to do in life anymore. Ambition was useless. And the cruel deceit of Janie! Making all that show of humbleness and

> scorning him all the time! Laughing at him … Joe Starks didn't know the word for all this … (Hurston 79-80)

Joe's lack of words indicated that Janie had managed to take Joe's voice away, making him even more powerless.

Janie's ability to "play the dozens" reinforced her role as *Ms.* because it was her job to deconstruct a man's core. Her ability to shake Joe through her attack on his manhood made it easier for him to die. He reached a point in which he was perhaps humiliated, and Janie used this as a tactic to eliminate him from the world. Through her verbal attack of Joe, Janie's voice became the vehicle of retaliation and self-assurance. She was realizing that she was beyond being mistreated and oppressed, and her voice was a tool in her liberation. As *Ms.*, Janie indicated that the power that Joe displayed in public was, in actuality, worthless, and in private, she was making him aware of her knowledge of him as a weakling. Janie affirmed her knowledge of Joe's weakness by boldly emphasizing his impotence – something that may have been present during their twenty years of marriage, but Janie chose to tolerate it due to the blindness that her own feeling created throughout most of their marriage. Her direct attack on Joe's manhood destroyed him because most men feel like if they cannot perform sexually, they are better off dead. John Oliffe suggested that

> Physical performance forms the basis for this construction of sex, a version that relies heavily on sexual competence. Men who are unable to perform sexually are affected in deeply gendered ways, and embody marginalized, subordinate forms of masculinity that result in humiliation and despair … Male sexuality confirms gender and masculinity is enacted through sexuality. Therefore, failure to perform sexually can challenge the fundamentals of masculinity, and make

> heterosexual men believe they are not 'real men' … There is a general expectancy that men should initiate sexual activity …, and that insatiable desire and libido are a measure of manhood in terms of the capacity for penetrative sex ... Failure to desire and initiate sex and enact dominant cultural expectations about men's sexual needs results in feelings of inadequacy for many men …" (2)

Joe was missing public and private power after Janie's attack. Janie is like Hurston because Janie takes on the nature of the African American man in order to free herself.

Hurston created her final male character, Tea Cake, as a "subtle beast" who tried to keep the negative suppressed, but the negative still surfaced. Tea Cake can be seen as Langston Hughes from Hurston's personal life. Hurston and Hughes, although never married to each other, had formed a strong bond like Janie and Tea Cake. There was something sweet about Tea Cake that made Janie cling to him, but Hurston put within Tea Cake what was recognizable in Hughes – envy and deceit that lay suspended at the root of the African American man's heart. Hurston continued to formulate Janie's role as *Ms.* through the physical destruction of Tea Cake. Janie's destruction of Tea Cake was unique because she was not at a point in their relationship in which she had come to hate Tea Cake, but Hurston set up a situation and a relationship in which she had her female protagonist eradicate something that she truly loved. As a *Ms.* herself, Hurston had to create Janie as a woman who kept a keen eye in reference to the negativity that could and would arise in African American men towards black women. It was not until Janie reached maturity that Hurston gave her the ability to discern beyond her feeling and to disregard her emotions when destruction was necessary.

Tea Cake's negativity of violence and jealousy go hand in hand in his relationship with Janie. Tracy L. Bealer pointed out in "'The Kiss of Memory': The Problem of Love in Hurston's

Their Eyes Were Watching God" that "'Hurston chose not to insulate her love story from destructive social forces[,]' … [and] Tea Cake's jealousy and violence is the novel's most intense and disturbing representation of the pervasiveness of domination because he is so unlike Logan and Joe, yet sporadically performs the same dominative masculinity that they do" (312). Tea Cake's negativity stemmed from his own feeling of inadequacy and, as a result, he became like Joe Starks before him, abusive and oppressive. At first, Tea Cake was comfortable with Janie and did not feel threatened by her beauty or any other man because he did not have any real competition until Mrs. Turner's brother came to town. His violence and jealousy were waiting for the opportune moment(s) to manifest themselves. Tea Cake's jealousy becomes apparent in a conversation between him and Janie: "'Tea Cake! Ah didn't know you wuz home.' 'Ah know yuh didn't. Ah been heah uh long time listenin' to dat heifer [Mrs. Turner} run me down tuh de dawgs uh try tuh tole you off from me.' 'So dat whut she wuz up to ? Ah didn't know.' 'Course she is. She got some no-count brother she wants yuh tuh hook up wid and take keer of Ah reckon' (Hurston 143). Tea Cake's jealousy escalates to violence, and "[w]hen Mrs. Turner's brother came and she brought him over to be introduced, Tea Cake had a brainstorm. Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside of him" (Hurston 147). The fear that Tea Cake experienced was Hurston's strategy to reveal that fear was the beginning of the African American man's unhinging during a challenge. Hurston later used a mad dog's attack on Tea Cake to show how the African American man will always possess an underlying fear of the African American woman that will cause him to want to destroy her. Hurston brought the true Tea Cake to the surface through his symptoms as a result of the mad dog attack. Tea Cake described his symptoms as something that "set his brains afire and grabbed at his throat with iron fingers …"

(Hurston 178). The symptoms could be likened to the destructive nature of the African American man that was beginning to take over Tea Cake, and no matter how hard he fought, it was stronger than he, and it was determined to manifest itself. The illness brought out what was innately in Tea Cake, and Janie had to reluctantly destroy it because Tea Cake would destroy her.

Even though Hurston, as a writer, chose to destroy selected African American men in *Their Eyes*, she was not one hundred percent against African American men. Her negative perception of the African American man started with her father, but there was some good in him. Robert Hemingway indicated that "John Hurston was one of the strongest men in the village … [and was] known for his bravery, leadership, and powerful, poetical preaching … [,and he] provided for his family well, building a sound eight-room house on his five acres, and always putting food on the table" (15). John Hurston also took a stand for Hurston during a fight between her and her stepmother, Mattie Moge. In that incident, "Mattie commanded John to have Zora arrested. He responded that 'he didn't have to do but two things – die and stay black. And then, he would never let [Zora] sleep in jail a night.' Her papa's stance must have done something for her soul. For once, her father was in her corner …" (Plant 23). As a result, Hurston was able to construct Tea Cake as something positive in Janie's life after the negative was suppressed, and he became the individual that complemented her protagonist Janie Crawford.

Hurston strategically gave Tea Cake the surname Woods to reveal how he, unlike Logan Killicks and Joe Starks, portrayed a true connection with Janie, and ultimately possessed what she was searching for, even though it was temporary, a marriage that made her feel complete/fulfilled. His family name, Woods, placed him as a part of nature which was connected to Janie and the pear tree. Janie saw that "[s]he could make him look just like any

other man to her. He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom … Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God" (Hurston 106). Tracy Bealer emphasized that

> Tea Cake's character is refreshing and remarkably distinct from those of Logan and Joe. Rather than revolting or stifling her, Tea Cake loves Janie by and through encouraging her equal participation in play and pleasure. Especially in their early interactions, Tea Cake piece by piece reassembles the play, pleasure, and beauty that Janie remembers from the space under the pear tree. Almost immediately after they meet, Janie is sharing in his laughter through wordplay that is an inverse reflection of 'playin' de dozens' with Joe … That verbal interaction was designed to wound, while her banter with Tea Cake brings delight to them both. Tea Cake permits and normalizes Janie's human desire for pleasurable interactions: 'Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play[,]' … [and this] recalls the 'natural' space of pleasure and satisfaction Janie discovered under the pear tree. (320)

Hurston did not simply stop at Tea Cake's last name to emphasize his positive effect on Janie's life, but she also connected him to another aspect of nature.

Being connected to Tea Cake caused Janie's to "[feel] self-crushing love[, and] … her soul crawled out from its hiding place" (Hurston 128). Janie saw an unconditional love in Tea Cake. She finally found a man that valued her "voice" and freedom, and, as a result, feelings of independence and true love were reawakened. Janie realized that Tea Cake may not be "an ideal husband, but he does grant [her] the dignity of self" (Hemenway 236). She saw Tea Cake as "the

son of Evening Sun" (Hurston 178), and by referencing Tea Cake in this manner, Hurston is indicating that Tea Cake completed Janie.

Although Janie loved Tea Cake, and recognized that they complemented each other, Hurston wanted to make it clear that Tea Cake was like all men she had dealt with in her personal life – there was something in him that could not be completely trusted. Tea Cake's attack by the mad dog not only represented the negative that Hurston felt lay in African American men but also brought the African American woman to a crossroad -- would she accept what was innately in the African American man or elude it? Hurston allowed Janie to recognize that "Tea Cake, the son of Evening Sun, had to die …" (Hurston 178). This emphasized that Hurston believed

> that black females should stand ready to love yet defend themselves even against their own men, who occasionally place their fragile manhood above the woman's personal safety. Thus, when Janie realize[d] that the Tea Cake she knew [was] … a raging beast bent on destroying her, she does not suffer abuse but heroically save[d] herself. To cushion women against this kind of pain Hurston claims that they must have the ability to perceive experience differently from the way of men. (Ferguson 194)

Janie had found herself with African American men who did not recognize that the hurt in their own lives was causing them to hurt others. The nature of the African American man scraped at the very core of the African American woman. He was unintentionally trying to rip out her soul; rip out her heart. He scratched the surface of every aspect of her being. Janie's act of destroying the African American men in her life was more about pleasing herself as a woman; she had to prune her pear tree.

According to the International Society of Arboriculture, "[c]ommon reasons for pruning are to remove dead branches, to improve form, and to reduce risk[, and] … mature trees are pruned as corrective or preventive measure" ("Pruning Mature Trees" 1). Hurston allowed Janie to destroy the negative in Tea Cake and Joe Starks to show that Janie was fulfilled when she was alone. Janie's act of destruction was to prune her image of the pear tree that she recognized in herself. Ironically, Hurston fictional character Janie Crawford achieved perhaps what Hurston desired to achieve in her own life. Even though Janie ended up alone, she was fulfilled as a woman and survives. Janie like Hurston realized that there was not a need for the African American man to some extent, and this was suggested through Janie's and Hurston's unsuccessful marriages. Janie not only survived the psychological and physical abuse exacted by her husbands, but also used those incidents in her life so that she could grow stronger in spirit and independence as a woman. Janie becomes "'one of the few – and certainly the earliest – heroic black women in the Afro-American literary tradition,' defining … heroism in terms of her autonomy, her trials, her search for self-definition" (Lupton 47). It is apparent through Janie that survival was significant for Hurston. In order to reveal the strength of a woman that Hurston wished she possessed, she carried it out through Janie.

Hurston's life reflected one bad experience after another with an African American man. She may have led herself to believe that she had dealt with her father's rejection, but that rejection by her father infected her ability to be comfortable in relationships with African American men, personally and professionally. When her final battle with an African American boy took place with the false molestation allegations, she revealed how her perception of her African American community had tainted her. Robert Hemenway expounded on this by referencing Hurston's reaction:

> '… I care nothing for anything anymore. My country has failed me utterly. My race has seen fit to destroy me without reason and with the vilest tools conceived of any man so far. A society, eminently Christian, and supposedly devoted to super-democracy has gone so far from its announced purpose not to protect children but to exploit the gruesome fancies of a pathological case and do this thing to human decency … This has happened to me, who has always believed in the essential and eventual rightness of my country. I have been on my own since I was fourteen … I have not lived an easy life, but struggled on and on to achieve my ideals … All that I believed in has failed me. I have resolved to die … I feel hurled down a filthy hole.' (321-22)

Hurston allowed herself to succumb to the emotional weight of her struggles with African American men, even though all of her life she seemed to have been successful in not allowing negative encounters with African American men to overtake her. Her character

> Janie was a woman alone – she was alone and judged. Janie's great fear was not death her fear was that others, the community, would not understand the depth of her love for the man she was forced to kill in self-defense. Their failure to understand and believe was a fate far worse than the murder charge. Free, then, to return to her community, Janie appeared stronger than before, for she [had] found deeper spiritual insouciance emerging … (Karanja 150)

Unlike Janie, the latter portion of Hurston's life was spent alone without a connection to her community or those she loved. Unfortunately, "Zora Neale Hurston died without funds to provide for her burial, a resident of the St. Lucie County, Florida, Welfare Home. She [lay] …

in an unmarked grave in a segregated cemetery in Fort Pierce, Florida, a resting place generally symbolic of the black writer's fate in America" (Walker, *In Search* 93).

Janie became, for Hurston, the epitome of all women. Janie "crossed the boundary of gender that is so readily apparent in her community and in Hurston's childhood [, and] as a result, Hurston's work announces the end of 'masculinities' as an exclusively male preserve …." (Powers 243). Janie ultimately prunes her pear tree by recognizing that the death of something often meant the life of something else. Janie was "a female character highly adaptable to change, who adjusts to collective labor, and who [was] able to actively to assure her own survival, [and through Janie], Hurston … [gave] us a 'New Woman,' a woman whose actions are larger, even, than heroic" (Lupton 53).

Chapter Three: Alice Walker's Negative Male Influences

"'… when I am ill and feel pain, things take on a certain extra clarity … something opens up and you begin to see things that you just wouldn't if you were surrounded by happy-go- lucky folk'" (Bradley 11).

-Alice Walker in an Interview with David Bradley

Often past experiences construct the way we view or feel about individuals, events, and/or our surroundings. The frustrations and pains experienced in Alice Walker's life may set the framework for the negative image of African American men in her 1970 novel, *Third Life* and her 1982 novel, *The Color Purple*. Alice Walker did not have the most pleasant experience with men from an early age. David Bradley noted in "Novelist Alice Walker Telling the Black Woman's Story" Walker's brother's, Curtis, accidental shooting of the eight year old Walker with a BB gun that left her scarred (9). It is important to note that, after the accident, a young Alice Walker's image was shattered. At the age of eight, a girl should learn from the men in her family that she is valuable and beautiful, but, unfortunately, Walker did not get that experience. The accident was also significant because Walker's eye was injured, and the eye is how individuals perceives what surrounds them. With the scarring of her eye, Walker started to see the negative aspects of African American men. Bradley elaborates on this: "Walker felt her family had failed her, especially her father. She felt that he had ceased to favor her, and, as a child, blamed him for the poverty that kept her from receiving adequate medical care" (10). As a result, "her father failed to 'give [her] male models [she] could respect'" (Bradley 10). This speaks to the fact that Walker's ability to see the African American man as positive was being tampered with by one of her primary role models. It was difficult for her to value or learn to value what was harming her. At this point of her life, men in Walker's immediate family did not show her the love and respect that one would expect and desire from family. Unfortunately,

these men, Willie Lee Walker, her father and Curtis Walker, her brother, became distasteful examples of manhood.

Prior to the accident and the physical damage that it caused, Walker "imagined herself as a scientist, pianist, or painter, but these aspirations were replaced with feelings of alienation" and as a result, she momentarily lost a vision for her own life (Bates 3). David Bradley emphasized that the incident resulted in Walker believing "[she] was ugly and disfigured [and] this made [her] shy and timid …" (10). The BB gun ignited Walker's experience with oppression, and her father and brother were responsible for the lack of confidence and the weakness that she experienced. Donna Winchell made it apparent that Walker's father, Willie Lee, did not expect or desire his wife or daughter to be strong forces within the family, and he deliberately favored his sons over the women in the household (7). The childhood accident resulted in Walker's recognition of whom and what Willie Lee was as an individual. Gerri Bates demonstrated Walker's perception of her father in the following quotation:

> [She] viewed him as a man with short comings, namely sexism. Her father acknowledged the systemic entanglement of racism that trapped him and his family, but he was blind to his web of sexism. Walker saw him as someone indoctrinated into the patriarchal culture of sexism, incapable of fighting it, refusing to release it. This all-encompassing sexism caused him to treat his wife and his daughters differently from the way he treated his sons. (4)

Bates speaks to the gray areas in Willie Lee – the impact of the world's racism and his own sexism. It is apparent that he was accustomed to seeing oppression and being oppressed. As an African American man, he was accustomed to destruction, and as a result, he psychologically

destroyed the women in his life. Walker, herself, emphasized that she came to "[learn] that [her father's] sexism was merely an imitation of the society in which he lived …" (Winchell 7).

In her 1988 afterword to *Third Life,* Walker wrote, "In my immediate family too there was violence. Its roots seemed always to be embedded in my father's need to dominate my mother and their children (344). Willie Lee's violent acts could be seen as a way to kill what he knew could possibly develop in women – a knowledge of their own way in the world without the leadership of men. Walker managed to accomplish what he did not necessarily approve of her accomplishing. Willie Lee believed that any education received by Alice would lead her to judge him as a man, and when Walker went to college, their relationship ended (Winchell 6). Walker, in her interview with David Bradley, did not express that she and her father ever had a critical conversation about her beliefs or his beliefs. Her father was simply, as Dr. Reginald Watson states in "The Power of 'Milk' and Motherhood: Images of Deconstruction and Reconstruction in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*," an African American man who "play(ed) a part in the continuance of psychological … abuse of the black woman during and long after the end of slavery" (159). She was not afforded the opportunity to share with him her insights as a woman. Walker confirms in her interview with Bradley that her relationship with Willie Lee was estranged, and, as a result, it can be concluded that he took his sexism to his grave. Their lack of communication, ironically, became Walker's mental freedom. She mentioned as a reaction to Willie Lee's death that "[she] didn't think [she] felt anything. It was years later that [she] really felt it. [They] had a wonderful reconciliation after he died" (Bradley 11). It was through Willie Lee's death that Walker ultimately escaped his grip.

The death of Willie Lee was a reminder of just how important he was to her life. She realized that it was "easier [for her] to approve of dead people than of live ones … [she] laid

down on top of his grave … to see what he could see, if he could look up" (Bradley 11). It was apparent that Walker gained an understanding of Willie Lee at the point of his death, and she was expecting him to speak to her in some way -- longing for him to say what he thought of her as a woman. It can be concluded from the above quotation that his death brought her a sense of peace because she realized that she would not be able to see herself from his perspective – a perspective tainted by sexism. She had been taught by her father "to look at things that [were] out of joint, out of balance, and to try to bring them into balance" (Bradley 12). Through his teachings, Walker came to an understanding that people only control others to the degree that they are allowed. Walker's way of balancing her life can be seen through her decision to marry a Jewish man.

Walker's marriage in 1967 to civil rights attorney Melvyn Leventhal took place during a critical time in history, a time when interracial marriages were frowned upon and a time in which many were still involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Walker's and Leventhal's marriage was similar to the marriage of Mildred and Richard Loving in 1958, which became the basis for "a landmark Civil Rights ruling [in which] the court struck down America's laws against interracial marriage in 1967" (Weir 1). Gerri Bates noted that "[Walker and Melvyn] were a team and a marriage, rebellious for the period in their thinking, politics, and love …" (13-14). Of the pair, Walker was perhaps the more rebellious in the eyes of her critics, simply for her decision to marry a white man as though an African American man was not worthy enough. Walker's rejection of the African American man through her decision to marry interracially speaks to her dislike for the African American man to some extent. Her interracial marriage "'[reminded] many …[black] men of [their] own failures … She [was] saying Black Is Beautiful, but not

necessarily always right …'", and although the African American man's "brutality towards women may be understood[;] … it must be resisted" (Dieke 71).

Walker also discussed the role of her grandfathers in her life during her interview with David Bradley: "'I knew both my grandfathers, and they were just doting, indulgent, sweet old men. I just love them both and they were crazy about me. However, as young men, middle-aged men, they were … brutal … But when I knew [them], [they were] sensitive, wonderful [men]'" (12). The latter speaks to the fact that Walker did not want to spend a lifetime waiting for an African American husband to decide to love her and/or to learn to value her. She wanted a relationship that was not based on the cycle of hatred, and one that would foster her development as a woman. She seemed to have recognized the greatness in the fact that the African American man does eventually change as he gets older, but once the change has occurred, the African American women in their lives become weakened by the years of the African American man's domination. Walker showed in both *The Color Purple* and *Third Life* how African American men "seem to desire control for [their] own sake – to make a statement about their own capacity to rule in the private sphere" (Jenkins 982), and once he had done so, he relaxes in pride during old age.

Cynthia Hamilton illustrated that "In Walker's novel[s] the "colonizer" is men, [and] women are their victims" (382). Hamilton's statement could lead one to view Walker's destruction of the African American man as a reflection of her feelings about slavery, and its impact on African American men and the family structure. Her novels *The Color Purple* and *Third Life* were set during the first half of the twentieth century, and this period was filled with difficulties for the African American man as well. Her characterization of the men in the above works can be attributed to the fact that slavery damaged the psyche of the African American man

and to the fact that the twentieth century was a time when many African American men became a violent and oppressive force in their role as sharecroppers.

During slavery the "African American males were invisible, except when perceived as aggressive and out of control, … were not considered to be fully human, and slave fathers of children who were not named or listed in birth records" (Pinderhughes 27). Pinderhughes emphasized the African American man's insignificance and his lack of a valuable place within family. Pinderhughes further added that slavery "reflects the long-standing tendency in this country to nullify and neglect maleness in American families. For all intents and purposes, the African-American male was a zero – he did not exist" (271). One author that truly knew the horrors that slavery brought about for men was Frederick Douglass.

Lisa Yuin Lee in "The Politics of Language in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave*" spoke to the fact that Douglass himself was voiceless through the first half of his narrative (52). His silence may not be of great importance to many, but it is critical to discuss in reference to Walker's characterization of African American men in *Third Life* and *The Color Purple*. Lee stated, "Again and Again, Douglass reenacts the themes of powerless watcher as he is forced to watch others torture Aunt Hester …, young and old Barney, Demby … and so on. Douglass emphasizes this "seeing" with repeated phrases such as: 'I was doomed to be a witness … it was a terrible spectacle' … 'I have never seen anything like it' (52). Douglass's role as an onlooker of violent behavior is important because he was an example of an African American man who observed the abuse that the white man inflicted on African American men and women. Although Douglass himself was not violent toward African American men or women, he was in a situation in which repeated observation of violence could have led to an

imitation of violent behavior even though he loathed it. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West expounded on this point in their text *The Future of the Race* by quoting Frederick Douglass:

> Ignorance and depravity, and the inability to rise from degradation to civilization and respectability, are the most usual allegations against the oppressed. The evils most fostered by slavery and oppression, are precisely those which slaveholders and oppressors would transfer from their system to the inherent character of their victims. Thus the very crime of slavery becomes slavery's best defense. By making the enslaved a character fit only for slavery, they excuse themselves for refusing to make the slave a freeman. (2)

Gates and West revealed, with the use of Douglass's words, that the African American man was destined for a life that is dominated by the effects of slavery. Consciously and unconsciously, the African American man carried the effects of slavery from generation to generation – affecting his treatment of those in his own race.

Walker's idea of the effect that the white man had on the African American man in *Third Life* and *The Color Purple* could have resulted from the violent relationship between the master and the male slave during slavery. In Douglass's *Narrative*, Douglass takes his readers through several situations that revealed the cruelty and violent behavior of the masters. In one incident Douglass describes the impact of seeing his Aunt Hester whipped by Master Anthony. He emphasized this in the following passage:

> I remember the first time I witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I will remember it […] It was the first of a long series of outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It

> was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was the most terrible spectacle. (397)

Douglass's use of the word *exhibition* in the above quotation indicated the enduring brutality inflicted on slaves that were seen by many. He believed that it was his fate to see this event, and that, one day, he would be an unwilling, but definite participant. His use of the words *blood-stained gate* to symbolize physical beatings reveals that as slaves entered slavery, it was almost always a guarantee that there would be bloodshed at the hand of the master. Douglass's *Narrative* serves as a fitting prelude to *Third Life* and *The Color Purple*, especially in how they depict the African American man's oppression and subsequent inability to control his own life.

The African American man was seen as a slave to himself because he had to deal with the fact that he had become an abuser of the African American woman. As a result of facing the monster that he had become, the transformation into a monster shows that there was a "dissolution of boundaries between what [went] on in the public sphere and in the private home where violence … unjustly oppress[ed] women within domestic spaces … (Davis 31). Walker marked the trouble that was in the African American marriage in *Third Life* and in *The Color Purple*. She created men that hated their wives and withheld love and support from them instead of being a source of love and support. Elaine B. Pinderhughes emphasized in "African American Marriage of the 20th Century" how the negative state of the African American man and woman relationship was a major reason the African American man victimized himself and his wife (274). Pinderhughes further added that "[t]he responses that men have to being treated as invisible (except when perceived as threatening, challenging or dangerous), and the responses of women to the expectation that they should compensate for social injuries, become sources of tension between partners" (274). The African American man may have received the label of

being an abuser because he struggled against white power. He was not the dominator outside of the home, and as a result, he forced physical and psychological control of the home. Walker's male and female characters had to carry the weight of white society's domination, with the African American women enduring not only white oppression, but the African American man's abuse and insecurities. Through his frustration, the African American man "blame[d] the white man for his own failure to be a man [in his home, and in doing so,] … he grant[ed] other men the power of God" (Winchell 44). The African American man maintained the lack of control in his home, but he did not recognize that he was doing exactly what white society desired. He was destroying and weakening the source that brought more African American men and women into the world – the African American woman. He allowed himself to be blinded by his struggle to gain status in a world that continued to function on the heels of slavery.

The African American man was characterized as a slave to the world even after slavery had ended. The African American man's role as a sharecropper in the 1920s was described by W.E.B DuBois: "'The slave went free; stood for a brief moment in the sun, and then moved again toward slavery'" (Hinson and Robinson 286). After a tragedy occurs, individuals anticipate a lasting period of victory, but there are always people and/or more circumstances that lurk and wait to take away the hope from the soul by casting a black veil over the eyes so the oppressed can continue to walk in darkness. Marek D. Steedman revealed in "How was Race Constructed in the New South?" that

> … sharecropping 'had emerged as the dominant mode of agriculture and rural society in the South,' [and] … [m]ost former slaves and their descendants worked as sharecroppers, often hopelessly indebted to their landowners … Sharecroppers were … employees whose relationship to their employer was regulated under

> laws governing master-servant relations … [S]harecroppers were legally a form of 'free servants'. (52)

Coupled with the physical and psychological impact of slavery, sharecropping came along to suppress the slightest dream of the African American man. Under the burden of debt and a life in which he was under the thumb of the white man, the African man "labored under a weight of oppression which offered virtually no escape" (Hinson and Robinson 288).

Sharecropping created an African American man who used life's mishaps as an avenue to continue to wallow in what slavery had created. Walker created her male characters Grange and Brownfield in *Third Life* as "victims of the sharecropping system …" (Winchell 43), and in *The Color Purple*, she used "the poor independent farmer and his community to frame her narrative" (Bates 91). In both texts, it is evident how slave history and the sharecropping system affected the psyche of the African American man. Walker's destruction of selected African American men in the texts revealed her frustration with the African American man's lack of responsibility for himself and his family. The characters Brownfield in *Third Life* and Albert in *The Color Purple*, just to name two, did not recognize their roles as patriarchs of the families who needed to break the cycle of violence, misogyny and self-hatred.

Chapter Four: Unfavorable Characters and Walker's Counter Approach

Alice Walker's *Third Life* revealed the oppression of the African American man by white society, and through the oppression, the African American man oppressed himself and became violent toward the African American woman. Walker, through her character Brownfield, revealed how oppression can lead an individual into a downward spiral. Brownfield's oppression was ignited because he lost all hope of leaving the South and improving his situation. He had "weeks of indecisive wandering … and… abandons all hope, for the present, of reaching Chicago or New York … He had no idea which direction he should follow to go North … Often at night he gazed at the sky, searching for an omen" (Walker, *Third Life* 43). Early in the novel, Brownfield felt going to the North was the best remedy, and it would take him away from what was familiar. However, the previous quotation indicates that Brownfield could not make up his mind about what he should do. His indecisiveness led him to believe that his present state was suitable for the moment. His act of gazing in the sky and "searching" showed he lacked the actual drive needed to break away from the norm. His lack of boldness in this critical moment of his life led to other oppressive acts. He allowed himself, when he did not venture North, to become an oppressor.

Brownfield further oppressed himself because he constantly blamed the white man for his problems and issues. Brownfield began to allow the hardships of life to overtake him early on in his marriage with Mem. Walker narrated how he allowed his debt to depress him and how "[h]e felt himself destined to become no more than an overseer, on the white man's plantation, of his own children" (Walker, *Third Life* 78). From Walker's narration it can be implied that Brownfield did not see himself amounting to greatness in his own life. He constantly saw himself as one that would always have to submit to the white man's way. He felt like the white

man had the right to destroy him. He may have unconsciously revealed his belief that whites had the power to destroy him as he chose to oppress his family. Amanda Davis argued in "To Build a Nation: Black Women Writers, Black Nationalism, and the Violent Reduction of Wholeness" that Brownfield "transforms the violence that has been inflicted upon him and his people into the violent disruption of domestic space" (37). Davis's belief is evident as Brownfield begins to physically abuse his wife Mem.

Brownfield had the tendency to treat Mem in the manner in which he was treated by whites. Mem was the focal point on which he released his frustration. Walker described how Brownfield "accused Mem of being unfaithful to him, of being used by white men, his oppressors; a charge she tearfully and truthfully denied … It was his rage at himself, his life and his world that made him beat her for an imaginary attraction she aroused in other men, crackers … His rage and frustration ruled" (78-79). It is obvious that Brownfield had nothing but hatred for whites, and he blamed them for his mishaps and lack of achievements. Davis confirms that "Mem's body was 'inscribed with the mark of the sovereign's power,' as Brownfield targets the home, domestic pleasure, and peace in an attempt to exercise his authority over intimate space … Mem's body literally becomes the text onto which Brownfield can write his frustration and declare his manhood…" (38). Davis's previous comment is a reminder of how African Americans were physically marked by the slave master with lashes from whips. In comparison, Brownfield did the same thing to Mem, reminding her directly that he was in ultimate control over her by leaving "his" mark on her body.

Brownfield's oppression of Mem ultimately results in her death. Before her death, Mem was determined to survive in a white dominated society; she possessed the drive that Brownfield did not, which further led to his rage. Brownfield was "determined at times to treat her like a

nigger and whore … His crushed pride, his battered ego, made him drag Mem from school teaching … it was his great ignorance that sent her into white homes as a domestic, his need to bring her down to his level!" (Walker, *Third Life* 79). Brownfield uses the words, *nigger* and *whore*, as a reference to Mem, degrading her further. He stripped important things from her like her occupation in order to gain self-satisfaction from her being diminished. Walker also emphasizes how Brownfield was out to change Mem into something he did not want in order to make it easier for him to mistreat her (82). His actions are synonymous to a slaveholder. The slaveholder was out to change the slaves mentally to make them more submissive. Likewise, Brownfield had the same goal for Mem, and he eventually kills Mem, which was perhaps the only way he could prove to himself that he was in ultimate control. Kate Cochran emphasized that his murder of Mem was his only chance of control, and he does succeed at blotting her out (89). As a result of Brownfield destroying Mem, he actually oppressed himself more; he spent time in jail, and he lost his controlling and dominating power.

Through *The Color Purple*, Walker created violent and weak misogynists. She revealed how the patriarchal structure with the African American man's lineage was a cycle of violence beginning with Old Mr. ____, Albert's father, and in turn, causing Albert to instill these values in Harpo.

The relationship between Old Mr. _____, Albert, and Harpo represented some kind of understood allegiance. When Walker introduced Old Mr. _____, it was apparent that he controlled Albert to some extent, and as a result, there was a weakness that arose in Albert in the presence of his father. Old Mr. _____'s control was evident when he visited Albert's house after Shug Avery had arrived. He felt he had every right to voice his opinion to his son about her stay: "Just couldn't rest till you got her in your house, could you? … Mr._____ don't say nothing …

Old Mr. _____ say to Mr. _____, Just what is it bout this Shug Avery anyway … Mr. _____ don't say anything" (Walker, *Third Life* 54). Old Mr. ____'s boldness toward Albert's personal life revealed how he dominated his son. When he first appeared, he instantly took charge of the conversation. Albert took on the submissive role by not responding during the first part of their conversation. Even when Albert got the nerve to respond to his father, Old Mr. _____ reminded him that he was in control: "Yeah … And throwed your life away … And a right smart of my money with it … [T]his my house. This my land. Your boy Harpo in one of my houses, on my land. Weeds come … I chop 'em up. Trash blow over it I burn it" (Walker, *The Color* 55). It is evident that Old Mr. _____ will always have control over his son to some degree; he owned Albert's property, and Old Mr. _____ assertively made Mr. _____ aware that anytime there was something he disapproved of on his land, he will destroy it. Old Mr. _____'s mental domination over Albert, caused Albert to rule Harpo.

Albert's domination of Harpo and Harpo's fear of and passivity toward Albert is seen when Harpo took Sofia to meet Albert because Harpo wanted to marry her. Walker noted,

> Young women no good these days … Got they legs open to every Tom, Dick and Harry. Harpo look at his daddy like he never seen him before. But he don't say nothing. Mr. _____ say, No need to think I'm gon let my boy marry you cause you in the family way. He young and limited … Harpo don't say nothing … Harpo sitting there with his head down and his hands tween his knees. (Walker 31)

Through the previous quotation, it is apparent that 1) Albert is like Old Mr. _____ in the sense that he is involved in Harpo's female relationships like Old Mr. _____ was involved in his. 2) Harpo reacted to Albert just like Albert reacted to Old Mr. _____ when Old Mr. _____ boldly

confronted him about Shug Avery. Harpo's silence and posture revealed his inability to shake the hereditary submissive acts toward his father. Old Mr. _____ taught Albert and Albert taught Harpo that real manhood included the ability to cause their sons to display weakness in regards to their fathers. Old Mr. _____ and Albert are "' … father-figures, who, trapped in a time –warp, want to be called 'Mister'. These are fathers who identify with the racist violence of (white) culture in the South by miming [the ability to weaken another] in their relations with their black sons'" (Jenkins 980).

Harpo began his cycle of being like his father. He had witnessed his father's treatment of Celie before and during his marriage to Sofia. He mimicked his father's behavior because that was all he knew in reference to being a man. What young man does not look at his father and long to be like him when he is made to believe that his father's ways are right? There seemed to be an understood expectation of Harpo, and he carried his father's behavior into his marriage with Sofia, and although unsuccessful in ultimate domination of Sofia, it is apparent that "Harpo was "weak in will," [and] controlled by fear of his father's power" (Jenkins 979). He longed to control women like his father did, which is evident in a conversation with Celie. He told her, "I want [Sofia] to do what I say, like you do for Pa … When Pa tell you to do something, you do it … When he say not to, you don't. You don't do what he say, he beat you … I try to beat her she black my eyes" (Walker, *The Color* 62). Even though Harpo never controlled Sofia, his lack of success in this aspect led him to view himself as powerless. He had failed his father again because he could not carry out his father's command of beating Sofia into submission.

Shug gave Mr. ____ the title of boy during the novel. She told Albert that "[she did not] need no weak little boy can't say no to his daddy …" (Walker, *The Color* 74). The use of the word *boy* indicated immaturity, and as a result of Shug's statement, it was evident that Mr.

_____ and Harpo had not reached maturity because they lived their lives for their fathers. The weakness that existed in the African American man in reference to his father resulted in the African American man's frustration with himself. In order to deal with his frustration and to show that he is powerful, the African American man begins to physically and psychologically abuse the women in his life. *The Color Purple* reveals the African American man's hatred of women through Celie's stepfather and her husband, Albert.

Walker portrayed men that had the tendency to instill in women a lack of worth or value. The first man the reader is indirectly introduced to at the novel's opening is Celie's stepfather. The stepfather was sexually and verbally abusive toward Celie. He was a man who was merely concerned about his own desires and did not have any regard for his daughter's body. He was exacting his superiority and control on Celie at an early age. The stepfather was so angered by his wife's lack of interest in him that he began attacking the next generation. In her first diary entry, Celie wrote, "Just say you gonna do what your mommy wouldn't … Then he pushed his thing inside … when that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it" (Walker, *The Color* 1). Celie's stepfather's words and actions were a direct attack at weakening her, and they were what forced her into passivity. Her body became her stepfather's property. Charmaine Eddy noted that "the [African American] male characters may hope to confer upon themselves a position of masculine dominance by transferring the structure of slavocracy to the relationship between men and women…" (6). Celie's stepfather, like a slaveholder, sold his children that he fathered with Celie. Celie wrote "He took my other little baby … I don't think he kilt it. I think he sold it to a man and his wife …" (Walker, *The Color* 3). The stepfather revealed that he had the power to give life to his children and the power to take it away. The stepfather continued to treat Celie like a piece of property, and he maintained

the role of slaveholder through his actions of trying to get Celie married. At the point in which the stepfather was trying to sell Celie to Albert,

> Celie's body pass[ed] from paternal control to the control of her husband … Celie [was] called from the house by her father's command and she emerg[ed] to be looked 'up and down' by Mr. _____. The equivalency established between Celie and the cow that accompan[ied] her as her dowry [stole] her status as a commodity in a patriarchal system of exchange … As Mr. _____ and Celie's stepfather discuss[ed] her attributes, they focus on her potential as breeder … and her strength as a laborer, as if she were a slave on display on the auction block before a potential purchaser. (Eddy 6)

By observing Celie's stepfather's treatment of her, Albert found it easy to be a violent and abusive overseer to Celie.

Jane Captuti mentioned in "Take Back What Doesn't Belong to Me': Sexual Violence, Resistance and The 'Transmission of Affect" that "[v]iolence is both the paradigmatic means of 'proving manhood' and the last resort of those without other forms of social power to accomplish that end" (3). Socially, the African American man was not powerful, and perhaps the last thing he would deal with was not being in control in his home. In the novel, situations were seen in which the older African American man sought a wife that was many years his junior. Perhaps he did this to train the woman to be what he desired and because younger girls were easier to control than a woman of equal or closer age. The latter was evident through Mr. _____'s relationship with Shug Avery. Shug was a woman around the same age as Mr. _____, but he did not abuse or mistreat her. He allowed himself to be weakened by Shug, but the opposite was true in his relationship with Celie, even as she ages.

Celie's and Albert's first sexual experience during their marriage was a form of psychological abuse for Celie. Celie wrote: "I lay there thinking about Nettie while he on top of me … then about Shug Avery. I know what he done to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it. I put my arm around him" (Walker, *The Color* 12). The fact that Celie's mind wandered showed that Albert had managed to warp a time that should be enjoyed by a woman – she began to focus on other things that gave her pleasure, her sister and Shug. Celie's lack of enjoyment and Albert's lack of emotion during sex revealed that he was only interested in satisfying himself. Celie later referenced that "Mr. _____ clam on top of [her] to do his business, in ten minutes us both sleep … He git up there and enjoy himself just the same. No matter what I'm thinking. No matter what I feel. It just him. Heartfeeling don't even seem to enter into it … The fact he can do it like that make me want to kill him" (Walker, *The Color* 65). Celie recognized that Albert was not giving her the satisfaction that she deserved, and doing "his business" further emphasized that Albert believed he was the only one that deserved pleasure in the relationship.

Albert's cycle of physical and mental abuse toward Celie revealed a cycle within the novel that showed both respect and hate for African American women, in general. By revisiting the fact that Albert married Celie at such a young age and the fact that he was not married to Shug Avery, it can be concluded that Albert recognized that older women were more in tune to what they desired and were strong willed. He wanted to hinder Celie from reaching the same state as Shug – carefree and in charge of her body and mind – because he knew subconsciously that she would no longer tolerate him. In a scene in which Celie liberated herself, Albert indicated that Shug was a woman that Celie was not. He stated,

> Shug got talent … She can sing. She got spunk … She can talk to anybody. Shug got looks … She can standup and be noticed. But what you got? You ugly … You too scared to open your mouth to people … And nobody crazy or backward enough to marry you … What you gon do ? … I probably didn't whup your ass enough … I should have lock you up. Just let you out to work. (Walker, *The Color* 205-6)

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from the above quotation. Shug's life experiences and choices made it basically impossible for her to be trapped by Mr._____. Shug recognized Mr._____ as weak, and Mr._____ was aware of this. He spent his time catering, pursuing and trying to please Shug; he recognized that she was confident in herself. He did not want this confidence to develop in Celie, so he began, during her youth, to assist her in thinking she was powerless, unattractive and worthless. The fact that he forces Nettie away and hides the letters that Nettie sent to Celie revealed Mr._____'s tactic in eliminating people/things that could boost Celie's confidence and self-esteem. Walker was characterizing a man who was set on destroying the identity of a woman. Mr._____ had created a woman, through his treatment of her, who "[saw herself] through the eyes of the other" (Floyd-Thomas and Gilman 535). This issue "[made] the Black individual self-conscious about her existence…" (Floyd-Thomas and Gilman 535). Walker used Shug to point out to Celie that she "have to git man off your eyeballs before you can see anything a'tall" (Walker, *The Color* 197). Shug's words indicated that the African American man distorted the woman's perception of the things around her. Shug continued, "Man corrupts everything … He on your box of grits, in your head … He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God" (Walker, *The Color* 197). The fact that man was everywhere was a constant reminder that the man dominated,

and his presence continued to instill weakness and hopelessness in women. The concept of man being everywhere was one that can be seen as very critical for Walker. Walker, as an African American woman who experienced many levels of oppression herself at the hand of the African American man, may have felt that her role as a woman was to build up the African American man, even though he weakened and/or attempted to weaken the African American woman. She recognized that the African American man is needed in the world around her, and chose to restore the man she broke down in her novels *Third Life* and *The Color Purple*.

In both texts, Walker went from a negative portrayal of the African American man to a positive portrayal. Her rationale for the destruction of the African American man through death and a negative depiction of him was a tactic used in order to restore him to his rightful place. The concept of rebirth was seen in *Third Life* through her characterization of Grange at the end of the text, and is also seen in Grange's relationship with Ruth.

Walker allowed Grange to experience a resurrection, perhaps to reveal to the reader that change is possible in the midst of oppression. Although Grange was still a flawed character in many aspects, he strived to amend his mistakes of the past. When Grange first returned to town, he does not exact anger or harm on anyone. His transformation is evident because he goes to Brownfield's house to take food and to assist after Ruth is born. Grange could have easily verbally attacked Brownfield for his slackness as a husband and a father, but he did not. Perhaps Grange saw Ruth's birth as his shining moment – to be a benefit to his family and not a hindrance like he was in the past. When Grange was first introduced in the text, he was an abusive father and husband who abandoned his family and went North. In the North there were periods of violence and crimes. Walker used the birth of Ruth as the moment in which Grange's

resurrection can be best seen as he began to experience his "third life". Ruth is the ultimate symbol of rebirth in *Third Life* because she indirectly elicited change in Grange.

Ruth's impact on Grange could be seen as Grange and Ruth dance together. When individuals dance, it reveals movement that is consistent and that requires dependence on another. Harold Hellenbrand believed that dance was "… a ritual expression that unites the present with the past …" (124). Grange and Ruth developed a stronger bond the more they were around each other. Grange would share stories of the past with Ruth, and she would listen attentively. Grange's past was one that consisted of executing and receiving hurt and pain. His present life with Ruth was far from that. It was evident that he only wanted the best experiences possible for his granddaughter, and he wanted to protect her from a world that consisted of so much hatred.

The theme of rebirth is also evident when Hellenbrand noted that Grange and Ruth nurtured a love that is free from wounds, and they have the ability to learn from each other without causing harm to each other (124). To further illustrate this point, Kate Cochran viewed Grange as God and Ruth as Job from the Bible (95). Biblically, God is seen as the Savior, and if allowed, he takes control and guides one's life. Grange instructed Ruth in the ways of life and tried to point her into what he felt was the right direction. Ruth suffered like Job in her life at the hands of her father, and she was ultimately rescued by Grange. Here, Grange's rebirth is evident because during his first and second generation he ran from responsibility. He clung to his final chance by allowing Ruth to become the focal point in his third life. At the end of the text, Grange saved Ruth for the final time by murdering her father and his son Brownfield. Grange, before he shot Brownfield, stated to the Judge, " 'Halt, Justice!'" (Walker, *Third Life* 338). The word *justice* was perhaps an indication that Grange was about to reveal what justice truly meant.

Felipe Smith discussed that "Walker explains that Grange's reason for killing his son ... are based on his desire to preserve what he valued in life … [T]he greatest value … is … a willingness to die (or to live) so that the best that has been produced can continue to live in someone else" (439-440). It could be argued that Grange's action disqualified him from actually experiencing rebirth; however, his willingness to destroy Brownfield made him a symbol of rebirth. Grange sacrificed his life so that its good qualities could shine through Ruth for generations. Walker uses the same techniques of taking us from a negative example of an African American man to a positive example in *The Color Purple*.

Walker also left the reader with a positive representation of Mr._____ through Mr._____'s relationship with Celie. Walker created Mr._____ as a failure in order to reveal that many African American men have not been taught how to be men, husbands or fathers. Walker wanted to emphasize the effort African American men take to change despite their past. The African American man often became bitter and frustrated because he did not know what steps to take to be a man. Walker's character Mr._____ was created to be an example of a man that strove to make changes in his life. Walker recognized, as a woman, that the African American man was not to be solely blamed for his behavior, and he needed forgiveness and understanding. Walker indicated through her character Sophia that it was not safe for a girl in a family of men (Walker, *The Color* 40), and Sophia's statement spoke to Walker's need for the African American man to be reconstructed. Walker's narrative technique of taking Mr. _____ from a negative to a positive character was her way of circumcising the African American man. Circumcision "is the surgical removal of some the foreskin of the penis in a male" (Puri 1). The foreskin is excess flesh around the penis. The procedure is believed to "protect against infections of the urinary tract and the foreskin [and] prevents cancer…" ("Circumcision" 2). It is apparent

that the process keeps a man clean and sensitive. Walker's redemption of Mr. _____ at the end of the text revealed a circumcision of his heart. Her circumcision of Mr. _____ represented Walker cutting away of what held his infection. She renewed Mr. _____'s heart by causing him to recognize the pain he had inflicted on Celie. In one of her final letters to Nettie, Celie noted changes she had observed in Mr. ___. She stated, "The first thing I notice bout Mr. _____ is how clean he is. His skin shine … Mr. _____ act like he trying to git religion … [H]e not so quick to judge …[H]e don't talk much or be round people … I look in his eyes and I see he feeling scared of me" (Walker, *The Color* 222-223). Mr. _____'s physical appearance is different, and based on Celie's statement, it was a face that was now appealing to her. Due to the fact that Mr. ___ was not around people or did not communicate often, revealed that he was taking time to deal with his heart issue. In his private time, "[h]e couldn't sleep … At night he thought he heard bats outside the door … But the worst part was having to listen to his own heart … beating so loud it shook the room. Sound like drums" (Walker, *The Color* 224). During the night, things are often quiet and people relax and sleep to escape the chaos of the day, but Mr. _____'s conscience tormented him. It reminded him of his negative actions as a man. His conscience led him in the direction of being kind, and kindness healed and restored Mr. ____'s heart. He recognized that meanness was killing his very existence, and he became the man that saw the value of communication with and love for the African American woman. Walker wanted to display to the world an African American man with potential and positive characteristics like his white counterparts.

In her work *To Live Fully Here and Now,* Karla Simcikova noted that Walker wrote in her work *Same River Twice* that "[a]s people of color and as women, as non-establishment or politically disempowered people, we face an increasing challenge simply to stay alive on the

planet [--] To be healthy hopeful and committed to the future (133). Walker's belief spoke to how she recognized that it was difficult for the African American man to survive on earth because he had so much opposition – often being opposed by the African American woman, whites and himself. Walker is "[a] strong believer in the innate nature of human kindness, the indomitability of human spirit, and the human potential to change (Simcikova 134). Walker saw the need to revitalize the African American man and to prove that he possessed the courage to change. It may be difficult to understand Walker's reasoning for building up the African American man at the end of the text after portraying him as an adverse character, but as an African American woman, she felt she was responsible for uplifting the African American man. Although Mr. ____ had made strides to repair the damage he had done to Celie, it was ultimately Celie's acceptance of his unspoken forgiveness that revealed the power and influence she had towards him becoming more and more positive. It is with the relationship between Mr. _____ and Celie in the latter part of the text that Walker revealed that it is part of the woman's responsibility to build up the African American man. Celie and Mr. _____ had developed "… a mature relationship … [that encompassed an understood] compassion and forgiveness" (Simcikova 75). Celie possessed the ability to "… sit by the fire with [Mr. _____]" (Walker, *The Color* 252), [allow] "the old devil [to] put his arms around [her] and just [stand] there on the porch with [her] real quiet … [and allowed herself to bend her] stiff neck onto his shoulder … keeping each other company under the stars" (Walker, *The Color* 271), and to spend time with him "sewing and talking and smoking … pipes" (Walker, *The Color* 272). Celie took on the spirit of Walker by expressing "Walker's belief that relationships must entail a continuous effort and willingness, on the part of both partners, to work through life's challenges" (Simcikova 69). Celie made the decision to trust and embrace the new Mr. _____ despite the painful past she

experienced with him. Through Mr. ____'s personal growth, his relationship with Celie, and Celie's forgiveness of him, Walker expressed that

> [people] should never choose to withdraw [themselves] from the human world and from relating to others, for with such an alternative, [people] would fail to realize [their] full potential by cutting [themselves] off from experiencing one of the greatest gifts of all in this world – the transcendent feeling of deep sharing, or communion – and from being able to give and receive love. (Simcikova 58)

Celie's and Mr. ____'s bond at the end of the novel revealed that she desired African American women to take an active role in thwarting the negative that they recognize in African American men. Walker emphasized in the above quotation that all human beings impact others in some way, and as human beings, we have a responsibility to forgive, embrace, encourage and guide whenever necessary.

Conclusion

Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker are two African American women writers who recognized that death is sometimes necessary for healing to take place. Through the destruction of selected African American men characters in the specified works, these writers recognized the issues in the African American man and brought them to the forefront. The African American woman's voice, through writing, is what is needed in order to save/rescue the African American man. These writers indicated directly and indirectly that if the African American man does not deal with his issues, he will continue to infect generation after generation. Hurston and Walker are not calling for a bodily death of the African American man, but the killing of the part of his psyche that has been negatively affected by past experiences.

Through my writing here, I recognized that Hurston and Walker are similar in technique, but they both bring their unique stance in their rationale for destroying their African American men characters. It is obvious that both have problems with the behaviors and/or attitudes of the African American man because of the oppression that each writer experienced with African American men personally. Hurston, through *Their Eyes*, seems to be more fixed in her perspective of the African American man than Walker. Although both writers see the antagonism in the African American man, Hurston seems to believe that African American men are affected by the negative past so much so that it becomes a fixed part of them, so they will always possess negative tendencies. Hurston illustrated this clearly through Tea Cake by showing how there was a desire for goodness, and for a moment, Tea Cake is an African American man restored, but his goodness would be eventually overshadowed by his negative behavior. In Hurston's decision to have Janie destroy Tea Cake, we see Hurston take a stand not to put the African American man in a higher position than she places herself. She loved him, and

this was evident through three marriages and through her creation of Janie as a character who desired marriage, but neither Hurston nor Janie was successful with marriage. Hurston as a writer during the 1920s through the 1950s was, in my opinion, more focused on declaring herself and women in general as the most powerful sex. I believe that Hurston was socially and culturally aware that we must build up the African American man, and indicated this through *Their Eyes* because 1) she recognized the goodness in Tea Cake 2) and after Tea Cake's death, Hurston indicated that "[Janie] had wanted him to live so much and he was dead … Janie held his head tightly to her breast and wept and thanked him wordlessly for giving her the chance for loving service" (Hurston 184), but I believe that she did not have the strength to fully restore the African American man like Walker. Hurston's approach of restoring was different from Walker's because Hurston chose to restore the African American man in the mind of Janie. Hurston wrote, "Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking" (193). *Their Eyes* revealed that she had lost her fight to save him physically, but he will live in her "memory [because it] made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace" (193). Hurston had not reached a redemptive nature like Walker, a nature in which Walker saw the African American man's ability to change.

Walker wrote *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple* twelve years apart, which speaks highly of Walker's character in reference to the African American man. Even though each text is written years apart, Walker did not shift in her perspective. She was consistent in her destruction and revival of the African American man. Walker had the ability as a writer to do what her forerunner Hurston could not do through *Their Eyes*. She did not reveal that she was permanently damaged as a woman/writer as a result of her negative personal

situations with African American men. She revealed that there was a need for the African American man, and her role as a woman and writer was to assist him in his plights. She articulates this in both works through her characters', Ruth in *Third Life* and Celie in *The Color Purple*, abilities to embrace the African American man, even though there were underlying issues within him.

I believe my research says to the African American community that there are still underlying issues that some African American men deal with. They struggle with the negative tendencies because of oppression and because they are often their own worst enemy. Too many African American men are downtrodden, and it started a long time ago. I believe that the African American man, to an extent, struggles with the psychological effects of being oppressed today, and no one has taught him how to deal with oppression he faces. Therefore, his moral character shapes the lives of his sons because he does not know how to tell his sons how to deal with the negative tendencies he has and/or negative experiences he faces.

My research emphasizes that, even today, the role and the importance of the father in the African American community are disappearing. I believe that some African American men struggle to overcome negative attitudes or behavior because there is a decline in traditional families in the African American community. Many children are in homes in which the mother becomes the only person in which they can identify. This becomes a challenge particularly for boys because the mother is limited in her ability to reveal to her son things that his father can. Today, we see many single-parent homes in which the mother takes on a dual role of being the mother and the father. It has become the mother's role to make sure that she establishes a strong position in the household and set the expectations for her sons. Like Walker and Hurston, the mother must be affected by the negative she recognizes in some African American men and

begin to take a stand in her own household to try to end the negative cycle. My research indicates that there is a call for a strong matriarch. Keith M. Bond the author of *Sacred Bond: Black Men and their Mothers* indicates that "[s]ometimes the matriarch of the family is the grandmother sometimes an aunt, a cousin, or Miss so-and-so down the street. Regardless of class, race or family relationships, … mothers [have] to find ways to give their sons confidence and the ability to perform in a society that often questions them, fears them and views them as the embodiment of America's worst pathologies" (xi). My writers of focus, Hurston and Walker, represent the matriarch because as women writers they attempt to reshape the tainted perspective of the African American man.

Their Eyes, Third Life and *The Color Purple* show that women experience a degree of oppression and are weakened and/or destroyed by the African American man, but Dr. Reginald Watson discussed in "The Power of the 'Milk' and Motherhood: Images of Deconstruction and Reconstruction in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*" that "even when the images of the 'milk' are soured, the power of motherhood can still reshape and reconstruct not only itself but also people and events that surround it" (156). He also emphasized that the "black woman's role [is now] a more fixed, powerful role, a role through which the black woman's survival and the African American man's sense of manhood become more certain" (Watson 157). It is interesting to note that even though the African American woman experiences hardship herself, she still recognizes the need to save those around her, particularly the African American man. Watson's above comments reiterates Hurston's and Walker's personal survival with negative African American men, their ability to minimize, in my opinion, women's plights in the selected works used in this thesis, and their ability to pay homage to the African American man through his restoration. As writers, Hurston and Walker

reveal that their relationships with African American men are greater than the pain inflicted by them; therefore, they chose to allow the relationships to expand and blanket the past incidences, and they also reveal that the "matriarchy tears down the negative [in the African American man] only to build a more positive black male image" (Watson 162).

The concept of a strong matriarch is evident today, and one playwright and actor that demonstrates this is Tyler Perry through his character Madea. As an African American man, Tyler Perry experienced a great deal of hardships at the hand of African American men in his life. He indicated in a 2010 interview with Oprah Winfrey that "he suffered brutal physical abuse at the hands of his father and severe sexual abuse at the hand of several adults" ("Tyler Perry's Traumatic" 1). He could have easily become like his victimizers, but he chose to represent how the mother-figure often has to become more powerful in black culture in order to sustain the African American man. Even though Perry chooses to dress as a woman, something that is frowned upon by his critics, I view his character Madea as his way of paying homage to the African American matriarch. He conceals manhood in order to represent the traits of African American women who sacrifice themselves to develop strong African American men. I do not believe he is intentionally trying to encourage homosexuality, but he wants to remind the African American culture that African American women are truly the backbone of the African American man's existence. Madea is like Hurston's and Walker's fictional female characters in *Their Eyes*, *Third Life* and *The Color Purple* because she endures a lot of heartache, but she lovingly turns the other cheek. Perry's Madea also illustrates that "black female familial leadership can still ingrain patriarchal values" (Patterson 15), and that the patriarchal role in the black community is tainted because

> the institution of slavery and its subsequent legacies have disputed American patriarchal laws and gender roles for African American community, thus placing women in social positions and relationships that typically have been designated for men … From Madea's roles as head of household, caretaker, wisdom-provider and hell-raiser she typifies the image of *strong* black woman – one who is fully functional in the absence of a man. (Patterson 15-16)

Hurston and Walker cannot be totally condemned as African American women writers for their rationale for destroying the African American man because I believe they were trying to alter others' perspective of the African American man. Their selected works bring awareness or remind the world that African American women today have to prune themselves against the negative and potential negative traits of their son's brothers, husbands and/or fathers. The novels also have the ability to bring about conviction in some African American men as they recognize the negative attitudes and behaviors of the African American men characters in these texts, and perhaps the novel can force the African American man to circumcise his heart and mind so he can increase his love for himself and those around him. As each writer chose to accentuate positive traits in the African American man through their African American men characters' restoration, the potential for change within some African American men today becomes evident because Hurston and Walker provided the revelation that change is possible.

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